

“It’s become fashionable”:
Practitioner perspectives on football hooliganism involving young people

Published in the International Journal of Police Science and Management 24th August 2020

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1461355720947778>

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Abstract

Senior officers responsible for policing football highlight a concerning increase in football hooliganism involving young people in England and Wales. This study is specifically concerned with people under 18 years old that are engaged with hooliganism in connection with football matches, which is an under-researched problem despite recent high-profile incidents. Surveys and interviews with football club safety officers, and police officers involved in football policing were conducted to gain a first-hand insight into this issue. Freedom of Information requests were sent to the Home Office, to establish data trends in youth arrests, banning orders and disorder at football. Despite the concerns of senior police officers, it was found that there is no readily available Home Office data on football hooliganism involving young people. The study highlights that this issue is perceived to be increasing, with children as young as 10 being involved. Whilst there is some indication that football banning orders are being used on under 18s, this is currently seen as a last resort for police forces with a range of interventions being used in order to divert young people away from football hooliganism. However, there is no nationally adopted approach to managing this issue. Youth projects have had successful results in preventing under 18s from going on to reoffend in a football context. Best practice interventions are recommended, which if adopted by football clubs and police forces may help to minimise the impact of football violence involving young people.

Introduction

This study examines 'hooliganism' involving children in connection with regulated football matches in England and Wales, and how this issue is managed regarding the use of football banning orders (FBOs). As detailed by the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) (2019a), the legislation of a regulated football match is complex. This study concerns football matches involving sides from the top six tiers of English football, from the Premier League to the Football Conference. The exact age of a child or youth is conflated within UK legislation. Importantly, throughout this study, the terms 'young person'; 'child' or 'youth risk supporter / groups' are used interchangeably to refer to those under the age of 18, the latter being common terminology amongst practitioners in a football policing context (see also Article 1, United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989).

Football hooliganism became a broader social issue in the 1960s (Giulianotti, 1994, p. 12) and continued to be problematic in the 1970s and 1980s leading to a repressive policing approach (Frosdick & Marsh, 2005, p. 156). Although the policing of football has changed to be less confrontational since the 1989 Hillsborough disaster (Frosdick & Marsh, 2005, p. 156), it serves as a reminder of the need for football to be policed fairly and effectively. However, football hooliganism remains prevalent in the media, with football hooligans seen as 'folk devils' within a moral panic (Cohen, 2002, p.3). With regards to hooliganism involving young people, this type of reaction can lead to those involved being labelled as 'deviant' (Becker, 1973, p. 9). This presents a challenge for the police to deal with this 'deviant' behaviour in a way that society is accepting of, while acting in the young person's best interests and not just satisfying the moral panic.

Football hooliganism involving young people has emerged as an issue over the last decade. In 2010, then Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) lead for football, Andy Holt, stated that there was a worrying and disturbing increase in youth football violence (Bridge, 2010). This is supported by suggestions of new 'youth firms' (Hopkins & Hamilton-Smith, 2014, p. 243) as well as high-profile incidents in the media. In 2016 a 13, 14 and 18-year-old were imprisoned and issued FBOs for an unprovoked attack on a Watford fan following a Premier League game in 2015 (BBC News, 2016). In 2016 BBC News revealed that over 100 FBOs had

been issued to under 18s within a 3-year period, some of whom were as young as 12 years of age (Burke, 2016). These media articles highlighted a discrepancy between how individual police forces are administering FBOs. Academic literature supports this, asserting that this discrepancy has been ongoing for some time (Pearson, 2005; James & Pearson, 2006; Hopkins, 2014; James & Pearson, 2015). These points highlight some emerging issues. First, alongside a lack readily available data, it appears that football hooliganism involving young people is a current area of concern. Second, it could be argued that police forces do not have a clearly defined strategy for managing the problem.

There is some contention surrounding the definition and police perception of a football hooligan or 'risk' supporter (Williams, 2001, p. 38; O'Neill, 2005, p. 94; Pearson, 2012, p. 80; Hopkins & Hamilton-Smith, 2014, p. 231). The European Union definition is: "a person, known or not, who can be regarded as posing a possible risk to public order or anti-social behaviour, whether planned or spontaneous, at or in connection with a football event" (College of Policing, 2018). This is a broad and imperfect definition which concerns more than just violence and Stott, West & Radburn (2018) suggest that police interpretation of this can lead to supporters posing little risk being classified as 'risk'. Therefore, it is likely in this study that 'youth risk groups' may be exhibiting a range of behaviours and practitioners will have varied interpretations surrounding the notion of 'risk'.

In order to understand the necessity for this research, one must consider what is already known about football hooliganism. Previous research (see Pearson, 2005; James & Pearson, 2006; Stott & Pearson, 2006; Hopkins, 2014) has considered the effectiveness of FBOs. Nevertheless, there remains a knowledge gap concerning football hooliganism involving young people, with an absence of research into this issue, therefore, this study adds value to the existing literature.

The extent of football hooliganism involving young people

Despite an abundance of literature on the topic, there is no accepted definition of football hooliganism (Giulianotti, Bonney & Hepworth, 1994, p. 2; Dunning, Murphy & Waddington, 2002, p. 1; Frosdick & Marsh, 2005, p. 28). Dunning (2000) states that 'it lacks precision and is used to cover a variety of forms of behaviour which take place in more or less directly

football-related contexts.’ Some of these behaviours may not even be criminal, but could also cover serious levels of violence. Context of the location that this occurs in is relevant as well, with incidents occurring not only inside stadia, but also at train stations and town centres for example (Frosdick & Marsh, 2005, pp. 28-29).

The Home Office collate and publicly release official data every year on the number of football related arrests and FBOs issued. This information provides a breakdown, such as offence type and whether the incident occurred inside a stadium and data has become more detailed since the year 2000. This is compiled by the UK Football Policing Unit (UKFPU) from data inputted by police officers about arrests and disorder incidents at football matches. Importantly for this study, there is no data on the age of those arrested, issued FBOs or involved in public disorder. This data provides a crude indication of the scale of football hooliganism, however the number of football arrests and FBOs have been falling over past football seasons. Senior police officers claim that this decrease is due to fewer officers being deployed to football, and the actual incidents of disorder are increasing (Kopczyk, 2018). This demonstrates that official data may not be sufficient on its own to interpret the overall scale of football hooliganism, let alone involving young people. Frosdick & Marsh also (2005, p. 37) highlight that arrest data for football is an unreliable indicator of overall crime problems. Qualitative ethnographic studies (Armstrong, 1998, p. 312; Pearson, 2012, p. 12) into football supporters suggest that hooliganism is not as widespread as suggested by the police or media, but these studies are limited to a small sample of clubs. The extent of football hooliganism may be found somewhere between these studies, official data and comment from practitioners.

Football Banning Orders (FBOs) and Policing Responses

Policing responses to under 18s who commit football related offences should be in line with under 18s who commit non-football related offences. A complicating factor is the potential for an FBO to be issued as a means of preventing further offending. Youth justice principles are not discussed extensively, but the policing responses with regards to under 18s committing football offences should be following the below concepts.

Cunneen, Goldson & Russell (2017) highlight concerns around the infringement of child Human Rights in the criminal justice system in England and Wales. They argue that judicial proceedings should be considered as a last resort, in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Robinson (2014) suggests that collaborative interventions and diversions are more productive ways of preventing young people offending. Goldson & Muncie (2015, p. 231) support this, stating that the focus of youth justice should centre around proportionality and embedding the Council of Europe's (2010) concept of 'child friendly justice' into the criminal justice system. Although there is no specific mention of FBOs in this literature, it could be translated as being inappropriate to issue an FBO to a juvenile without significant evidence of alternative interventions being attempted initially. A key recent change to the youth justice system was the replacing of reprimands and final warnings with a system of youth cautions or conditional cautions under the Legal Aid Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 (Crown Prosecution Service, 2019b). An important aspect of the issuing of youth cautions is that the police are the main agency with responsibility in administering them, which is key to this study in terms of how police forces are utilising them for football offences.

Following the violence at Euro 2000 involving England fans the government rapidly passed legislation in the Football (Disorder) Act 2000, to tackle football hooliganism both domestically and internationally, but this was regarded by some as 'panic law' (James & Pearson, 2006). This amended existing legislation under the Football Spectators Act 1989, broadening the scope and power of FBOs (Hopkins & Hamilton-Smith, 2014, p. 225). These restrictions can prevent a banned individual from entering geographical areas surrounding stadia and town centres, as well as from traveling on the rail network. It also includes requirements to surrender passports at their local police stations when their club team or international team are playing fixtures abroad. This led to criticisms of FBOs being too draconian and disproportionate (James & Pearson, 2006; Hopkins & Hamilton-Smith, 2014, p. 223; James & Pearson, 2015; The Football Supporters Federation, 2018), which highlights a key concern of whether they should be issued to juveniles at all. This broadening of the scope of FBOs is regarded as indicative of a political period under the New Labour government that focused on preventative control measures against those posing a risk (Zedner, 2009, p. 81; Hopkins & Hamilton-Smith, 2014, p. 226). FBOs can be obtained by

police forces against an individual in two ways. Firstly, following conviction for a relevant offence (14A), and these can last for up to 10 years. Secondly, following a complaint by a police force against an individual (14B), and these can last for up to 5 years. It is important to note here, there is no differentiation between a child and an adult regarding the application of this legislation. Regardless of age, one can receive an FBO under the same criteria.

The Crown Prosecution Service (2019a) provides the following guidance on football offences:

“Where appropriate, consideration should be given to diversion by way of a Youth Caution. If the offending cannot be satisfactorily addressed by a Youth Caution, then consideration should be given to a Youth Conditional Caution.”

This suggests that police forces should be operating with a focus on diverting young people away from football disorder, as opposed to seeking FBOs. However, this is not currently reflected in the CPS and National Police Chiefs’ Council (2016) football offences prosecution policy which makes no reference to young people, stating:

“...there will be a presumption of prosecution whenever there is sufficient evidence to bring offenders before a court on appropriate criminal charges...”

This could result in police officers engaged in the role of policing football receiving mixed messages from the CPS and the NPCC when dealing with cases involving young people.

Previous research into FBOs has questioned their proportionality with Human Rights, specifically article 5 (Pearson, 2005; James & Pearson, 2006; Stott & Pearson, 2006; James & Pearson, 2018). Recent research has suggested that a liaison-based approach to football policing may help to reduce disorder (Stott, Hoggett & West, 2012; Stott et al, 2018; Stott, Pearson & West, 2019). Hopkins (2014) highlights concerns that police forces are funded by the UKPFU to obtain FBOs, creating a target driven culture. These studies highlight some concerns about the use of FBOs and it raises questions of whether they should be issued to juveniles. The lack of research addressing football hooliganism involving young people and

the subsequent use of FBOs demonstrates the necessity for this study. The methods used within this research are detailed below.

Methods

This research utilises a mixed methods approach, allowing for triangulation between the data (Robson, 2008). The foundation of this approach was scrutiny of Home Office Data and Freedom of Information (FOI) requests, to establish data trends over recent years. Whilst FOI requests represent a valid research tool in social sciences research (see Walby & Luscombe, 2017), it can be problematic due to data exemptions, processing costs and mismatched research requirements (Afful-Dadzie & Afful-Dadzie, 2017).

Data was obtained from surveys and interviews with football safety officers and dedicated football officers (DFOs) as they play a critical role in pre match planning, match day policing and subsequent enforcement action (see College of Policing, 2018). The perspective of police officers and safety officers allows for triangulation between their experiences and the data, providing a narrative, whilst enhancing research validity (Robson, 2008; Denzin, 2012).

An online survey link was sent to all 92 Premiership and Football League clubs and all 43 police force areas in England and Wales, with a forwarding request to relevant safety officers and DFOs respectively. 26 were completed by safety officers and 10 by DFOs, providing a potentially indicative sample but not fully representative. The survey questions were grouped into themes surrounding 1) *the extent of football hooliganism involving young people*, 2) *interventions* and 3) *the use of FBOs*. The responses were based on a Likert scale allowing for the provision of descriptive data (see Likert, 1932; Robson, 2008).

Interview participants were recruited through previous professional contacts with the researchers or through participant contact networks. This use of both convenience and snowball sampling can be particularly effective when trying to gain access to hard to reach groups (Sadler, Lee, Lim & Fullerton, 2010; Brancati, 2018, p. 128;), such as police officers. The interviews lasted around 30 minutes, were digitally recorded, and transcriptions created allowing the common themes, identified above, to be examined. In total, there were seven interviews, with some conducted as group interviews (DFOs 1, 2, 3, 4).

The interview participants represent a spread across the football league (see figure 1). Given the range of clubs included, with varying levels of reputation for disorder, they can be regarded as indicative of the population. Nevertheless, as not all clubs are captured within this study, this research is not fully representative.

| League: | Premiership | Championship | League 1 | League 2 | National | National North/South |
|------------------------------|-------------|--------------|----------|----------|----------|----------------------|
| Number of clubs: | 2 | 4 | 6 | 3 | 6 | 4 |
| Percentage of league: | 10% | 16.7% | 25% | 12.5% | 25% | 8.3% |

Figure 1 – representation of football clubs by league in research interviews

Results & Discussion

This section examines the results of the data collected through the FOI requests, surveys and interviews. The topics in this section are considered under the following three sub-headings: *the extent of football hooliganism involving young people; interventions; football banning orders*. Given the sensitivity surrounding this research, participants were anonymised and given a label of Safety Officer 1-3 or DFO 1-6. Crucially, the names of football clubs, police forces and other sensitive data have been redacted from the research.

The extent of football hooliganism involving young people

The below FOI requests did not yield any usable data due to retrieval being in excess of the cost allowance:

- Number of football related arrests of under 18s for each season since the year 2000
- Number of football disorder incidents graded as 'low', 'medium' and 'high' that involved under 18s for each season since records were first taken

Some data was returned and is summarised in figure 2.

| | | | | |
|-----------------------------|--|----------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|
| FOI request | Number of football banning orders obtained against under 18s for each season since the year 2000 | | | |
| Home Office response | Data not held prior to the 2016/17 season as records of previous FBOs are removed from their databases once they have expired. 18 people who were under 18 years-old that were subject to a football banning order (correct as of 29 November 2018). Following provided: | | | |
| | Season | New youth (under 18) FBOs | Total new FBOs | % of new FBOs that are youths |
| | 2016/17 | 33 | 517 | 6.4% |
| | 2017/18 | 10 | 460 | 2.2% |

Figure 2 – Freedom of Information data results

These results highlight two important findings for the study. First, the Home Office, or perhaps more specifically the UKFPU, is not actively mining data in relation to the number of youth arrests or FBOs and applying any form of analysis to understand this data. This is despite senior police officers, being quoted in the media saying, ‘there is an increase in youth risk, which is concerning’ (Keegan, 2018). Second, it is apparent that FBOs are being issued to under 18s, but without more detail around this data it is not possible to understand exactly why they are being issued and the seriousness of the offences that have been committed. What is particularly concerning, is that previous reports into football violence have not had access to enough data to identify the scale of the issue (Frosdick & Marsh, 2005, p. 88). The UKFPU and Home Office must ensure a more robust method of collecting data on football hooliganism involving young people, which details the number of youth arrests, FBOs and disorder incidents in the publicly released data.

From the survey respondents, it is apparent that most football clubs have elements of youth risk supporters attached to their clubs (see Figure 3). The majority are smaller numbers, but some clubs have a higher number (45+) of youth risk supporters. This is supported by the interview participants, who all had youth risk groups attached to their clubs. These varied in

size from 20 to 100, which was dependent on how problematic the club was, and the kind of fixture being played.

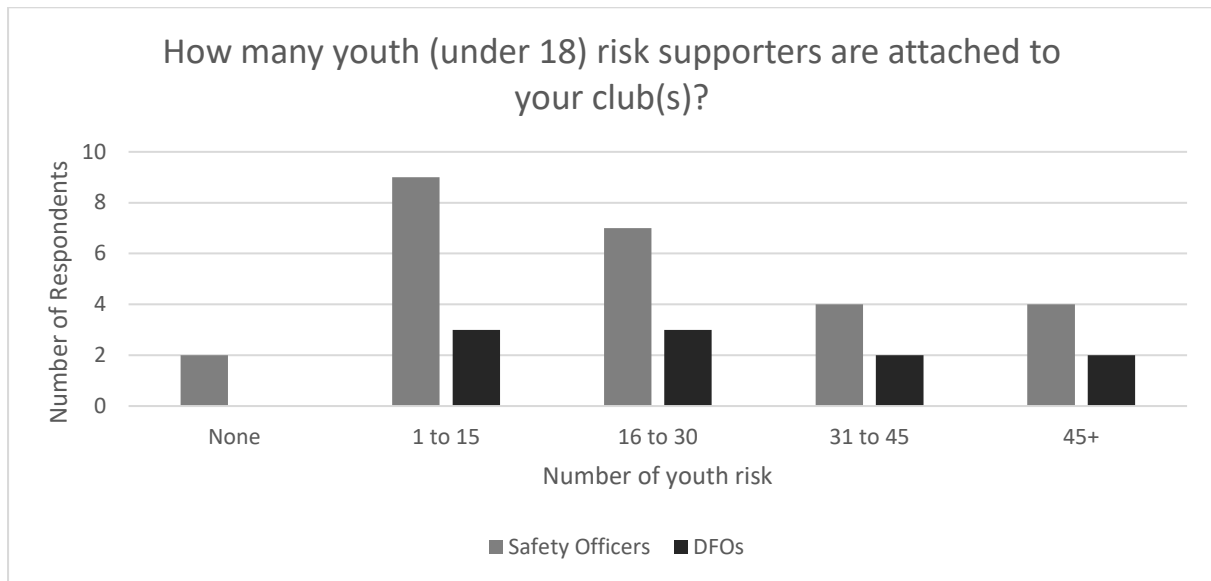


Figure 3 – Numbers of youth risk supporters attached to clubs (Research survey data)

These findings indicate that most football clubs will require some form of intervention, which can be graduated according to the scale of the issue being faced. Participants were able to recount specific incidents involving youth risk supporters that had occurred at their clubs. For example, DFO 3 & 4 had seen a large-scale incident that involved around thirty 12-16-year olds encroaching the pitch, throwing missiles and engaging in disorder.

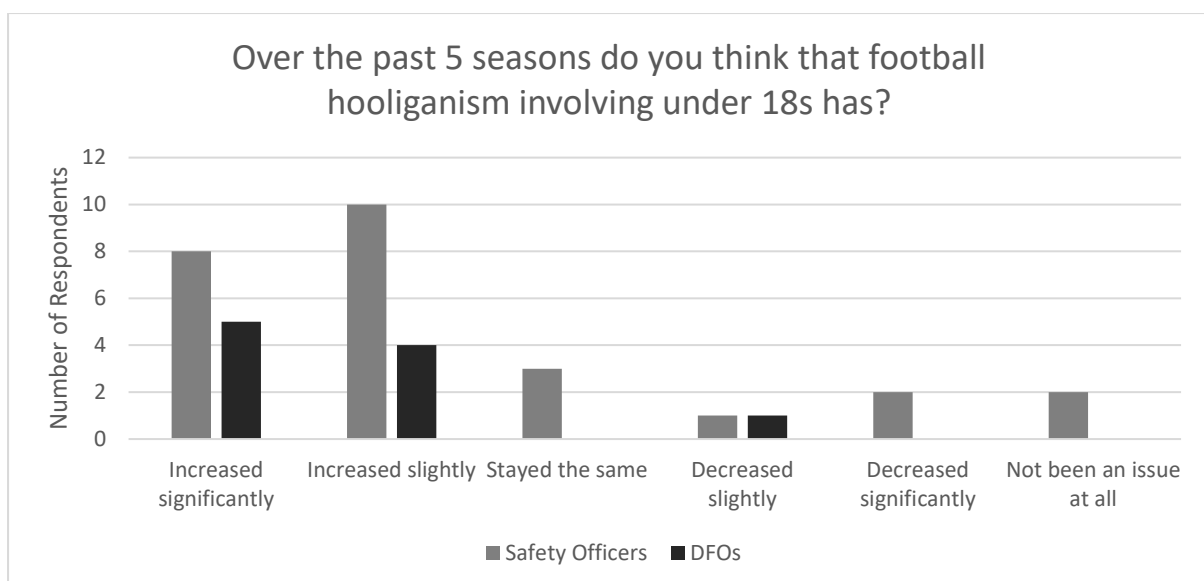


Figure 4 – Perceptions of the scale of hooliganism involving young people (Research survey data)

Figure 4 shows that across all respondents (both safety officers and DFOs), most thought that football hooliganism involving under 18s was a growing problem. In the absence of any Home Office statistics that can help to reveal national trends, this indicates a wider problem. However, the responses may be club-centric, and not representative of the wider football league. The Safety Officers interviewed were mixed in their responses, with the issue either improving after initially being a problem, getting worse or remaining constant. Conversely, the DFOs tended to consider that the issue was getting worse:

“...it’s almost like it’s become fashionable. It’s got a lot worse since the Euros in my opinion. It was getting bigger before, but it’s definitely come back into fashion.”

(DFO 1)

“Yeah, social media plays a massive part in that...you can interact with likeminded groups...you can put yourself in the shop window as wannabe hooligan casual away day kind of group.” *(DFO 2)*

“Youth groups are problematic now, a lot more problematic...the last 2 years I’ve noticed the change...across the board I think, home and away everywhere we go it seems to be the younger groups...it’s nationwide, other clubs, I don’t know how they’re dealing with it but it’s nationwide.” *(DFO 5)*

These DFOs tended to consider that the problem was national and escalating. There is potential for media reporting of the disorder in Marseille involving England fans in Euro 2016 to have had an amplification effect on how the participants perceive the issue. However, it may be that young people have been inspired by media and online images and aspire to become part of the hooligan subculture. Redhead (1997, p. 33) contends that from the 1980s onwards football hooliganism started to develop a ‘casuals’ subculture, with a focus on the wearing of fashionable clothing brands as opposed to team colours. This is particularly evident today, with designer brands such as Stone Island being worn as a mark of the football hooligan subculture (Treadwell & Ayres, 2014, p. 53). Interestingly, Doidge, Kassakowski & Mintert (2020, p. 4) suggest that ultras, with an organised collective identity and activities aimed at supporting the club, is now the most common football subculture. Crucially, this study found no evidence that young people were engaging in an ultras subculture. Whilst the manifestation of ultras subculture in English football is worthy of further consideration, it is beyond the scope of this paper (for further discussion see Doidge et al., 2020). Instead young people may be attempting to emulate hooligan subculture, not just on a match day but through online platforms. As suggested by Shalom et al. (2019), the

use of social media can lead to more disorder at football events. Hall (1978) and Melnick (1986) highlighted that the media were amplifying the issue of football hooliganism. A new phenomenon of 'social media amplification' processes may be occurring, enticing young people to immerse themselves in hooligan subculture. This is an area requiring further research and investigation.

Participants raised particular concern regarding the age at which children are becoming involved in football hooliganism, with DFO 6 highlighting the involvement of 10-year olds. However, this did appear exceptional, as most participants indicated the baseline age amongst youth risk groups to be 12 or 13 years old. These young people may be learning behaviour from older hooligans (or even parents who are part of a risk group), or be impressionable and vulnerable to exploitation by adults to commit criminal offences (Morgan, 2009, p. 69), which was highlighted by Safety Officers 2 and 3:

"It's much easier to lead a 16-year-old into danger...with flares it was two 15-year olds and we actually saw the adults give them to them outside, take this in and I'll give you a drink, and then of course the kiddy gets caught with the flare." (*Safety Officer 3*)

"I think there is, and I think they would like to cross the bridge into the big boys' group." (*Safety Officer 2*)

Certainly, the young people at football matches may be compelled into criminality by adult risk supporters (Densley, 2013, p.86), advancing their status into a football risk group and be further embedded in the hooligan subculture. This is worthy of further exploration and practitioners in this area may need to take this into account as a mitigating factor when managing interventions.

Interventions

Both the survey and interview data suggested that a range of interventions are being used by football clubs and DFOs when managing young people and hooliganism, such as warning letters, school visits, home visits and short-term club bans. It is evident that the police are working closely with clubs, and in some instances, there may be a joint approach to the issue. This broad approach at early intervention suggests that clubs and DFOs attempt to divert young people away from hooliganism, before resorting to FBOs. This is in line with

notions of proportionality in youth justice principles (Goldson & Muncie, 2015; Cuneen et al. 2017) and if utilised as a minimal intervention can be effective in encouraging young people to desist from re-engaging in their negative behaviour (McAra & McVie, 2015, p. 133). All the participants were engaged in a range of intervention processes, some were more developed than others, which was based on necessity due to varying levels of issues being encountered. Safety Officer 1 had an emerging problem, with interventions in their infancy:

“We had a conversation with <local police force> about this...I think the police’s view, same as ours, we need to start finding out who they are...trying to prevent as much of that as we can by interventions. Even if they are called into see me...great to see you lads, but you’re coming into a very controlled environment, this is what we expect, you’ve walked into a very family friendly club, you’re not going to spoil it are you.” (*Safety Officer 1*)

Safety Officer 1 describes a minimal based intervention, which has the potential to be effective (McAra & McVie, 2015, p. 120) at the earliest possible stage. By not ignoring an emerging problem, an element of trying to ‘nip it in the bud’ is prevalent here. However, Safety Officer 1 was aware that further contingencies would be required should the behaviour of the group not be modified by the initial interventions. An evidence-based framework that demonstrate a range of potential interventions according to the risk posed and any further escalation would be of use for practitioners in the position of Safety Officer 1.

Other safety officers and DFOs had a more established approach, which included a graduated response to dealing with problematic young supporters. This comprised of initial warning letters jointly sent by the club and the police, moving to a club ban if the behaviour continued to escalate, as well as other proactive work:

“We’ve also run with the community trust...20 odd people we thought were on the fringe of or part of our risk group we got them in a football match in our shirts, playing against the local police. Moreover, there has been lectures by the local police explaining what the fall out will be if they carry on down this road. And also, if you bring their parents along with them as well.” (*Safety Officer 2*)

Although this approach may be more complex to implement and achieve, it could have the outcome of building positive relationships between authority figures and young people,

which can prove effective in deterring future offending (Souhami, 2007, pp. 52-53; Robinson, 2014, p. 212). This club led approach that is supported by the police can help to secure a 'buy in' from the young person and foster a positive relationship with their football club.

A range of more complex interventions were conducted by some of the DFO participants. DFO 3 & 4 conducted an in-depth post-match investigation involving around thirty 12 to 16-year olds for offences of pitch incursion and missile throwing. However, an alternative to prosecution (and a subsequent FBO application) was to administer conditional cautions, where the young person had to attend a workshop. During this, there were inputs from the police, football club, community trust and parents who had been affected by youth violence. Logistically this was challenging to arrange, but DFO 3 & 4 commented that it was a preferable option instead of criminalising young people. Whilst this research has not been published, from the thirty young people that went through the programme, only a few have gone on to reoffend. DFO 6 had a similar system for those under the age of 19 who had committed offences at football:

"It's a 5-week compulsory conditional caution...a restorative justice option. We have the club speak, the safety officer speak, talk around the consequences of pyrotechnics, talk around the consequences of their actions fining the club. You know I can stand there all day saying don't do that as an authority figure, but when they are saying this is your club, this is the cost to us...Then we have a [stabbing] victim's mum, and her input is really impactful...I think we've had 80 or 90, and only one reoffends." (DFO 6)

DFO 6 commented as well that this is a logistically challenging disposal option, requiring a multi-agency input, and can only be conducted for those that have committed offences. This disposal option is in line with current recommendations around proportionality and 'child friendly justice' (Goldson & Muncie, 2015, p. 231), and supports the concept that young offenders are likely to desist from criminal behaviour (Moffitt, 1993; Maruna, Coyle & Marsh, 2015, p. 165) without undue criminalisation. Prior to this, DFOs 3, 4 and 6 commented that they had attempted other interventions such as acceptable behaviour contracts or club bans in partnership with the football club. Whilst there are clear merits in the schemes once the young person has committed an offence, it could be argued that

several young people who have not committed offences may benefit from this type of intervention. Due to costs and logistical issues, it may not be possible for the police to use these interventions routinely. Consideration could be given for UKFPU funding for FBOs to be redirected to exploring the effectiveness of such schemes to develop an evidence base.

The police encountered some problems when attempting interventions with young people, specifically in an operational context:

“Yeah, that’s why I’ll always try and go for one. It does you know, you’ll get a gobby one, one that wants to talk, they’ll all join in. It’s bravado, it does big them up unfortunately.” (DFO 5)

“This is my passion that we the police make them more confident...we should know where they are and not allow them to meet but we the police make them stronger and more confident and give them the kudos by following them around, guarding them and stuff like that.” (DFO 1)

Deviant behaviour can be amplified by official reactions to it (Lemert, 1951; Muncie, 2015, p. 122). An issue identified with the police trying to engage and intervene with youth risk groups was that they could inadvertently empower them and amplify deviant behaviour. This supports the research of Wiley, Slocum & Esbensen (2013) who found that frequent police contact leads to further delinquency. This corresponds with previous football policing research (see Weed, 2001; Stott & Pearson, 2007, p. 230; Stott et al., 2008), which suggests that if the policing response is not conducted proportionately it may amplify football hooliganism. The police officers in the research were acutely aware of this, but also found it challenging to strike a balance where these groups are sufficiently monitored in order to prevent harm, but not too much that they are empowered.

Football Banning Orders (FBOs)

When discussing the question of whether FBOs should be issued to under 18s, most of the participants responded that this should be a last resort after other interventions have failed. This is in line with Goldson & Muncie’s (2015) notion of proportionality in youth justice and opposes Hopkins’ (2014) assertion of a target driven culture around FBOs. Safety Officer 3

was a former police officer with experience of working in football policing, and spoke candidly on FBOs when posed the same question:

“Yes, if the offence is right. So, as a police officer we were absolutely he’s dropped litter, get him a banning order. And in the police if you’re told to jump the answer is how high and I was very much down that line.” (*Safety Officer 3*)

“[speaking about a recent fixture] It was a fantastic atmosphere, it was a cracking game of football. Do you need a 3-year ban because you got over excited and ran up and down with a flare? What you need to be is educated. There is a line you cross, have a great night but just don’t cross that line. Whether I’d have said that as a police officer I can’t say if I’m honest. I’ll be honest with you, I didn’t have that attitude back then.” (*Safety Officer 3*)

Safety Officer 3 is demonstrating an approach now that is more balanced and focused on education of young people but acknowledges that this may not be the case for all police officers. This provides some support to previous studies into FBOs which suggest disproportionate use (Pearson, 2005; Pearson & James 2006; Stott & Pearson, 2006; Hopkins, 2014). This is supported by further remarks from Safety Officer 2 around potential inappropriate issuing of FBOs:

“[speaking about two under 18s who had been given FBOs] There was intelligence on him but that was it, there were no convictions. And the other one was just a normal kid who thought it’d be fun to take a flare to the ground...they gave him a banning order which I thought was quite harsh, because I honestly think, with hindsight I could have just dealt with it internally.” (*Safety Officer 2*)

This may be an isolated incident, but this case suggests an inappropriate use of FBOs, which supports the assertion by Hopkins (2014) that FBOs are used as a general deterrent to other supporters. However, it does not appear to be a targeted action at risk supporters according to Safety Officer 2. It appears that this case may have been better dealt with at a lower level, such as a conditional caution, and it was not necessary for the police to apply for an FBO. The conflicting information in CPS and National Police Chiefs’ Council (NPCC) policy regarding whether a prosecution (and subsequent FBO application) should follow a football related offence may lead to police officers seeking FBOs unnecessarily. A recommendation is for the CPS and NPCC to revise their policy to ensure consistency of information for practitioners regarding under 18s.

Hopkins (2014) contends that DFOs construct a favourable narrative towards the use of FBOs. Whilst all the DFOs spoke in a positive manner about the use of FBOs if the circumstances merit it, the comments from DFO 5 contradict the claims by Hopkins (2014):

“[Speaking about a 17-year-old] I’ve got one lad, he caused issues the last game of the season, he was an issue at <football club>, an allegation of assault against a steward that was NFA’d. He’s gone onto the pitch in the <competition name> this season. He’s assaulted someone, non-football related, but then the week after he’s assaulted someone on route to a football matches. He’s had the opportunities, we’ve worked with him. I’ve worked with him an awful lot, the case is with the youth justice team, it’ll be their decision...I’d be quite happy to go for a conditional caution, he could do some work up at the club or something.” (DFO 5)

Despite this young person being problematic on a routine basis, DFO 5 demonstrates a high degree of patience and proportionality in their approach to dealing with them. If this young person were issued with an FBO, it would be as a last resort after several other interventions. Had DFO 5 been involved with the case of the pyrotechnic described by Safety Officer 2, it is unlikely that it would have resulted in an FBO being issued. This supports previous studies (see Pearson, 2005; James & Pearson, 2006) that demonstrate a lack of consistency between the application of process and legislation between different police forces, as well as individual officers. An alternative solution could be to establish clearer criteria for when the police should apply for FBOs, but this could be rejected by officers who may feel their discretion is being restricted. A factor that may influence police discretion in the use of FBOs is the funding process involving the UK Football Policing Unit (Hopkins, 2014). This is not extensively discussed here, but the DFOs in this study suggested that some of this funding would be better allocated to intervention-based work, as opposed to solely for FBOs.

Conclusions and recommendations

Despite there being extensive research into the issue of football hooliganism, there is no specific research which considers the issue of football hooliganism involving under 18s, which this study has attempted to address. The research has exposed a fundamental flaw in Home Office data collection, which cannot provide any indication about the scale of this problem. This is despite concerns from senior police officers. This research has found that

the issue may be a national problem that has become worse over recent seasons but further research that utilises a broader range of participants (including the young people concerned) is required to fully establish this. There are specific concerns about the young age at which some children are becoming involved in youth risk groups, and there is the potential for undue influence into criminality and the hooligan subculture from adult risk supporters. There may be a process of 'social media amplification' where young people are engaging in the hooligan subculture online, but further research is required around this.

Practitioners in this area demonstrated that they employ a range of interventions to manage the issue, with a view to fostering a positive relationship between the young person and the football club. Generally, these are used in a graduated manner, utilising early interventions to minimise anti-social behaviour before it escalates into criminal behaviour. It is clear that an evidence-based guide of actions to deal with this issue are needed. A key concern for the police practitioners is that by engaging with young people, it may amplify the behaviour they are seeking to remedy.

Youth justice policies and literature suggest that FBOs should be issued as a last resort, after other diversionary tactics have been utilised. This study found isolated examples of FBOs being inappropriately issued to juveniles, providing some support to previous research. This may be a by-product of conflicting CPS and NPCC policy guidance. However, the police officers in this study demonstrated a proportionate approach to their use against under 18s, judging cases on their merits and seeking a range of interventions prior to considering an application for an FBO.

Considering the key findings from the research, the following recommendations are made, which may assist football clubs and police forces to manage the issue of football hooliganism involving young people:

- 1. The Home Office and UKFPU need to more thoroughly analyse data*

Senior police officers have stated that this is an area of concern. However, there is no process in place to analyse data that is held around arrests, FBOs and disorder incidents involving under 18s. Analysing this data will help to understand the scale of the issue.

2. The CPS and NPCC prosecution policy for football offences needs amending

Currently this joint policy which sets out a presumption of prosecution for football offences is in direct conflict with CPS guidance that under 18s should be issued youth cautions. This may have the effect of sending mixed messages to practitioners, therefore greater clarity is needed with the policy updating with a specific reference to youth offending in a football context.

3. Police forces and football clubs need a standardised set of intervention responses

It was evident that DFOs and safety officers are utilising a range of graduated methods to intervene and divert young people. There is no standardised national guidance however, with individual clubs and police forces developing practice in isolation. These include informal discussions, acceptable behaviour contracts, home and school visits, football matches and club bans. Partnership working between police forces and football clubs was evident, and this is imperative. Particularly because the DFOs highlighted concerns that police contact with youth risk groups is empowering them and amplifying their behaviour. The football club participating in the process more readily may negate this amplification. This range of responses could be standardised through the UKFPU and the Football Safety Officers Association, which would help to ensure under 18s are not unnecessarily criminalised.

4. Youth projects should be developed further

This study highlighted potentially effective youth projects, involving a multi-agency approach with the police, football clubs and youth justice teams. Although logistically challenging, resource intensive and costly, the low reoffending rates suggest potential merit in these schemes. The UKFPU funding that is utilised for FBOs, could be redirected to support police forces with the costs of these schemes, particularly in times of austerity. Consideration could also be given to running a version of these schemes at an earlier stage before offences have been committed.

Despite the findings of this paper, more research on this under studied topic is required. A key suggestion is that early intervention is required to minimise the impact of football

hooliganism involving young people and divert them before they become the future generation of football hooligans.

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